

Governor Signs “Employment First” Bill Into Law

Bill supports Governor’s initiative as chair of the National Governors Association by creating opportunity for more integrated employment for people with disabilities



NEWARK – Governor Markell [signed legislation today](#) to further help open the door for people with disabilities to work side-by-side with other employees, mirroring the initiative he is championing during his yearlong tenure as chair of the National Governors Association. That initiative, titled [A Better Bottom Line: Employing People with Disabilities](#), aims to increase employment among individuals with disabilities. Specifically, the initiative will focus on the employment challenges that affect individuals with intellectual and other significant disabilities, including veterans who return wounded, and the role both state government and business can play in facilitating and advancing opportunities for these individuals to be gainfully employed in the competitive labor market.

Historically, people with disabilities have had fewer choices in what they did during the day or where they lived, and had therefore been more dependent on state benefits. Sponsored by Rep. Debra Heffernan, the Employment First Act (HB 319) encourages state policies to give people with disabilities more choice and more independence.

“Individuals with disabilities should have, to the maximum extent possible, the same opportunities as all others do,” said Governor Markell. “My NGA chair initiative, coupled with the Employment First Act and other efforts underway in

Delaware, will help us provide more people with disabilities the chance to engage in productive employment.”

House Bill 319 would require state agencies that provide services to persons with disabilities consider, as their first option, employment in an integrated setting for persons with disabilities. The bill also establishes an Employment First Oversight Commission as part of the State Council for Persons with Disabilities to review goals and objectives and prepare an annual report.



“People with disabilities consistently demonstrate their abilities and value to our society. Often though, they don’t have the opportunity to choose where or whether they would like to work,” said Rep. Heffernan. “People with disabilities want

to be contributing members of society, and this new law will provide them the opportunity to gain employment. Folks going to work would not have to rely on government benefits like Medicaid and other social services programs. They would contribute to the economy both through taxes and by purchasing goods. It truly is a win-win situation for everyone.”

According to the January 2011 Current Population Survey, approximately 17 percent of Americans with disabilities are employed, compared to 63 percent of individuals without disabilities. The low employment rate has forced people who could live independently to depend heavily on others to define and support their choices. Additionally, only 22 percent of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities who are employed participate in integrated employment. The rest are segregated from the rest of the workforce.

“The Employment First Act will foster more employment opportunities for people with disabilities, in turn, strengthening their quality of life.” Sen. McDowell said. “This act, passed by the General Assembly and signed by the

Governor, combined with the Governor's NGA initiative will truly make Delaware a leader in this area."

According to the Alliance for Full Participation, a national organization that promotes employment for people with developmental disabilities, approximately 20 million of 70 million families in the U.S. have at least one member with a disability (one out of 10 families raising children have at least one child with a disability). People with disabilities in the U.S. have an annual spending power of \$796 billion – more than any ethnic minority group.



"The Developmental Disabilities Council genuinely thanks Governor Markell, Representative Heffernan, and Senator McDowell for breaking down the barriers to access to employment for people with disabilities and veterans," said Pat Maichle, director of the Delaware Developmental Disabilities Council. "The outcome of this action will mean freedom for this generation and a better Delaware."

"What often separates people with disabilities from the rest of the population is financial security," said Rita Landgraf, secretary of the Department of Health and Social Services. "The Employment First Act challenges all of us in Delaware – companies, nonprofits and government agencies – to seek out meaningful employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities. Having a job will effectively foster independence and enable more individuals with disabilities to be fully participating and thriving members of our communities."

"The Governor has continually demonstrated his commitment to supporting employment opportunities for people with disabilities in Delaware," said labor secretary John McMahon. "The signing of HB 319 further demonstrates that and we're pleased his role as NGA chair takes this cause to a national

level.”